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Family Boundaries, Commercialism, and the Internet: A Framework for Research

Joseph Turow

University of Pennsylvania, jturow@asc.upenn.edu

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Disciplines

Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | Family, Life Course, and Society | Internet Law | Privacy Law

Family boundaries, commercialism, and the Internet

A framework for research

Joseph Turow

The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6220, USA

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This paper presents an *information-boundaries* perspective on the family and the Internet with the aim of helping to set the context for child development in the new media environment. Drawing from family studies, sociology, and communication, it lays out a model for viewing the family in relation to the Web. The paper draws research ideas out of the framework that center on four areas: family communication patterns; filters and monitors; information disclosure practices; and the Internet in the larger media context. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

During the past few years, the Internet - especially its World Wide Web graphics interface - has become a fixture in a rapidly growing number of US homes. Although electronic mail and chat rooms are popular, the fastest growing use of the Internet seems to be in its commercial domain. Marketers of all stripes have found the Web a great place to target parents and youngsters with ad messages and products while getting information out of them that can be used for further marketing. These activities have raised controversy and alarm - and even led to new government regulations.

The growing social debate and the rapidly rising presence of commercialized Web sites in US households have so far not led to a stream of published studies that attempt to understand its impact on the family. Many writings do exist on the implications of traditional mass media, such as television. That literature, however, barely begins to address a raft of new questions about commercial intrusion and family privacy that the Web raises.

This paper presents an information-boundaries perspective on the family and the Internet with the aim of helping to set the context for child development in the new media environment. Drawing from family studies, sociology, and communication, it lays out a model for viewing the family in relation to the Web. It uses the model to elucidate two views of the Web. One sees the new and enduring commercial dynamics as helping to reinforce divisive tensions that researchers say are features of families throughout society. The other view hails e-mail and related activities as countering this dysfunctional development by strengthening family relationships and reducing stress in households.

To what extent is one tendency triumphing over the other, and how might that change over time? To suggest ways to answer this question, the paper first lays out the family information-boundaries approach and relates it to the emerging domestic, media, and regulatory environment. The paper then draws research ideas out of the framework that center on four areas: family communication patterns; filters and monitors; information disclosure practices; and the Internet in the larger media context. Because the Web is a harbinger of an even broader digital interactive media environment, the issues raised about the context of child development through the information-boundaries prism will increase in importance as the new media world takes hold.

2. The family and the private/public realms

For the purpose of this paper, a family will be defined as one or more adults and at least one child or teenager who live together on an ongoing basis. A dominant theme of scholarly discussions of the family centers on the functions of "public" and "private" realms of interaction in society, with the family traditionally dubbed "the private." Thinking of the family as private as opposed to public may seem natural, but the separation is not a very old one (see Zaretsky, 1986). Although writers have traditionally

discussed public and private realms as though they were objective, externally observable phenomena, recent scholars have argued that the distinctions are socially constructed and negotiated (Fahey, 1995). The terms private and public may therefore hold different meanings for different family members in different family environments. Some scholars even argue that the boundary between home and work is a false one, for these boundaries are malleable and easily penetrated by the welfare state or even by mass media (see, e.g., Habermas, 1989; Lasch, 1977).

Nevertheless, distinctions between private and public are still extremely important to society's view of the family because people act as if the differences mean something (Fahey, 1995). The epigram that "your home is your castle" continues to survive as a reflection of the adamant social belief that strong boundaries between the two domains should be the norm even if they are not always the reality. Researchers insist that this belief has crucial consequences. Hess and Handel (1985) argue that strong family relationships evolve through an awareness of boundaries between family members and the rest of the world. In their lives together, parents and children negotiate ideas about how and why they are similar to and different from each other and various other people.

Bronfenbrenner (1975) extends this notion directly to argue that dysfunctional social institutions can, through impact on the family, adversely affect child development. Berger and Kellner (1964/1985) suggest that "the plausibility and stability of the world, as socially defined, is dependent upon the strength and continuity of significant relationships in which conversation about this world can be continually carried on" (p. xx). As a kind of corollary to these ideas, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) argues that a strong and caring family relationship can be a potent force to help children, adolescents and parents cope with the fast-changing learning and working conditions in which Americans find themselves at the turn of the twenty-first century. However, dual careers, single parenting tensions, poverty, and a host of other factors have converged to make strong family units difficult to achieve at a time when they are sorely needed.

The Council also points its finger at the mass media. It asserts that in recent times, they have been helping to short circuit the potential for supportive family relationships to an unprecedented extent. Electronic media have permeated the lives of American youth. Through television, radio, records, films, and videos a "heavily materialistic youth culture has emerged, weakening and challenging parental authority and stable, supportive bonding with a caring adult" (1995, p. 36). One obvious solution - more time with parents - is increasingly unrealistic because youngsters' increased media use is accompanied by less family time. "Although there has been less research than the problem deserves, the time that American children spend with their parents has decreased significantly in the past few decades" (1995, p. 36).

Elkind (1994) extends this theme about the way commercial media are implicated in the "splintering" of the US family. He points out that "the entertainment, information, and communication industries have fueled a new and heightened consumerism by targeting and catering to the diverse interests of the buying public" (p. 24). He suggests that the marketing driven media environment increasingly urges parents and children, men and women, and people of varied ages to consider their differences rather than their similarities. He argues that this target-oriented media world encourages individual interests over family togetherness. It privileges child decision making over parental authority, and it pushes outside marketing influences over parents' influences and, perhaps, values. With the increasing role in children's world views being shaped by marketers, children's sense of family identity (and through that kids' sense of social stability) may erode.

Elkind and other writers are important for calling attention to the role that commercial media may play in reinforcing and extending crucial family problems. Ironically, though, the media world that family analysts critique is quickly being eclipsed, and they have not turned their attention to the implications of that change. Taking the place of the traditional electronic environment of radio, videos, audio CDs and one-way television is a digital interactive world symbolized by the Internet and interactive television. Neglect of these developments is unfortunate because the new technologies that are moving rapidly into US homes raise a raft of new questions about the relationship between family boundaries, commercialism and information that few family theorists have systematically considered together.

One view of the new technologies leads to the conclusion that their commercially driven dynamics may reinforce the dysfunctional family dynamics that Elkind and the Carnegie Council have bemoaned. It might, for example, cause tension between teens and parents regarding the disclosure of information to Web sites that offer free products for valuable information. Other aspects of the Web - e-mail is one - have been hailed as activities that strengthen family relationships and reduce stress in households. To what extent is one tendency already triumphing over the other, and how might that change over time? Virtually no research has spoken to this topic. The first step in addressing it is to pull back and look at the emerging environment.

3. The Internet and family boundaries

Although the Internet itself dates back to its creation by scientists in the 1950s, its graphical interface, the World Wide Web is much more recent, dating to 1993. The number of US households going online has grown so rapidly that any numbers presented as current are sure to become obsolete quite soon afterwards. In the middle of 1999, Dataquest found that 36% of American households were "online" (Wired, 1999). By the middle of 2000, a variety of sources pegged online households at 44% (Elkin, 2000).

The Web is paradigmatic of the kind of digital interactive technology that will permeate the home during the twenty-first century. It has three features that, taken together, distinguish it from all past media that bring the outside into the home. First, its digital nature means that parents, children, and outsiders can send, retrieve, transform, and store the material that moves across it. (A 13-year-old can carry on a discussion in a chat room, and the firm that operates it can store the text for future analysis.) Second, the Web's two-way, interactive nature means that family members and outsiders can respond to one another in an ongoing fashion. (The chat room operator can send ads for products that reflect the interests that the teen reveals through the ongoing chat.) Third, its ability to function through sophisticated computer software and hardware means that family members' activities can be tracked, sorted and predicted through increasingly intelligent agents. (The company hosting the chat room can analyze the discussions and sell the results - and even the opportunity to reach the discussants - to market researchers.)

The Web is becoming a major communication vehicle for much of American society - so much so that trade magazines now refer to an *Internet economy*.¹ Consulting firm estimates in 1998 were that the Internet economy generated US \$301 billion in revenue and employed 1.2 million Americans. Much of that use is to engage in electronic mail, chat room conversation, and personal Web sites. As the Web has matured, however, a larger and larger portion of it - and a larger portion of its use - has related to commercial purposes. The Web's commercial (.com) sector has skyrocketed, outpacing by far the growth rate of nonprofit (.org), educational (.edu), and government (.gov) sites. Electronic commerce is also growing by leaps and bounds. Marketers of all stripes, from soap manufacturers to porn purveyors have found the Web a great place to deliver their ad messages quickly and efficiently.

Americans are going online in large numbers. A study in early 1999 by Nielsen Media Research and CommerceNet found that 92 million people over the age of 16 in the US and Canada used the Internet at work or home (Bridis, 1999). Although affluent, highly educated white males dominated the Web in its first few years, figures near the turn of the century find almost as many women as men online. Moreover, the numbers of African Americans and Hispanic Americans who have online connections have been rising steadily. Although the Web population is still skewed toward the upper-middle class, it is becoming less so as the months past.

A national survey of parents released in March 2000 found that 28% of all US children access the Internet from home. Parents in 49% of US households reported that their children access the Internet from some location, at home or elsewhere (National School Boards Association, 2000). Around the same time, other studies noted that about 45% of US households had online connections. Marketers saw the Web

¹ The Industry Standard, a popular magazine that focuses on Web business, is subtitled "The Newsmagazine of the Internet Economy."

becoming a hub of activities. "Nearly half of North America uses the Internet," exulted a CommerceNet executive in 1999. "We use it to communicate, to learn, to shop and to buy. It is as integral a part of our lives as the telephone" (Bridis, 1999, p. D7xx).

The analogy to the telephone is important beyond its recognition of the Web's centrality. As Marvin (1988) points out, in the telephone's early years, many Americans were thrilled with the possibilities of the technology at the same time that they worried about the intrusions it would bring to the home and the private information it might take out. The Internet has also evoked a combination of fear and hope. A national survey of US parents of 8- to 17-year-olds in late 1998 and at the start of 2000 (Turow, 1999a; Turow & Nir, 2000) found most American parents deeply conflicted about the Web. Across the nation, parents and the press have heralded the Web as a way to help the family by connecting them to relatives, schools, and informative Web sites for homework. Fully 81% of parents with online connections at home said that the Internet is a place for children to discover "fascinating, useful things" and nearly 68% said that children who do not have the Internet are disadvantaged compared to their peers who do. At the same time, over 77% of parents worried that their children might give out personal information and view sexually explicit images on the Internet. Fifty percent agreed that "families who spend a lot of time online talk to each other less than they otherwise would" (Turow & Nir, 2000, p. 12). In a 1998 survey (Turow, 1999a), 79% said that it bothered them when advertisers invite children to Web sites to tell them about products.

Many of these tensions and hopes reflect a desire to properly calibrate the permeable boundaries between the family and the world outside it - particularly when it comes to the protection and socialization of children. Concern about the Web as a conduit for advertisements, "fascinating, useful things" and "sexual images" underscores that familiar program genres make up a key part of the online experience. That, in turn, raises the concerns that Elkind (1994) and the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) have expressed regarding commercialized mass media materials coming into the home. Public worries about children giving out "personal information," by contrast, underscores that digital interactive media challenge family boundaries with respect to another information flow - one going out of the home. This challenge to the "private" nature of the family recalls similar fears about the telephone. A close look at marketers' work in the developing digital interactive environment suggests, however, that what is developing is not simply a combination of traditional mass media and the telephone. It is a new commercial domain, with new features and possibly new implications for the family.

3.1. The Internet and information flows into the home

Since video, music, and direct mail are easily available online, it is tempting to see Web materials coming into the home as merely an amalgamation of all of these and other mass media. From the standpoint of parental boundary setting, however, three features of the Web make auditing the flow and enforcing rules about it much more difficult than with previous media. One feature is the Web's virtually unlimited nature; individuals can access literally millions of sites at any time, on subjects from pandas to pornography. A second aspect is the presence of a huge number of commercial sites targeted to virtually any demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle interest one can imagine - including many that aim at children and teens. The third feature of the Web that makes parental auditing more difficult than before is the complexity of the technology. Not only do many adults have trouble with it, many of their own youngsters are more savvy and confident about the digital world than they are.²

The emphasis on commercial targeting is so great on the Web that concerns about family splintering that Elkind and the Carnegie Council raised regarding traditional media would seem to apply

² This circumstance may change when the current generation, comfortable with the Internet, gets older and has children. Then again youth's supremacy over the Web may not change because the technology involved in the new media will, being updated, be updated for purposes, and in ways, that seem to attract agile young minds.

here to a much greater extent. Web technology increasingly allows visitors to sites to “personalize” the material sent to them by specifying what they want. Marketers see today's teenagers as the replacement consumers for their parents, the aging baby-boom generation that so captivated business for 50 years. To the commercial realm, these “echoboomers” are prime targets for the development of brand loyalties at a particularly sensitive time in their lives. By cordoning off entertainment and advertising areas of the Web with personalized materials that are just for them, and then creating separate consumption arenas for their parents and younger siblings, marketers may well reinforce family splintering in ways that go beyond traditional media.

The potential implications of the Internet as a target marketer's dream have not made it into public discourse about the Web and the family. Instead, the great percentage of concerns centers on the wide availability of sex, violence, and commercialism on the Web (see Turow, 1999a). Web versions of sex, violence, and advertisements, however, are often exactly the same as those on a video game cartridges or magazines that an adolescent can surreptitiously bring home through nonelectronic means. What is different is the torrent of objectionable material easily available to the home and the consequent difficulty that parents feel they have in controlling what their kids access.

So far, three solutions to concerns about objectionable material have emerged. They involve filters, monitors, and safe haven sites. Filters are computer programs that parents can use to stop certain words or Web sites (or both) from entering the home. Monitors are computer programs that parents can install on computers to track (secretly or openly) where their children go on the Web and what they do when they get there. Safe haven sites are child-friendly sites on the Web that provide parents with software that ensure children go to them and nowhere else.

Filters are certainly the most controversial of the three boundary-protecting mechanisms. Critics argue that the programs are often severely flawed. Parents who block sites with the word “sex,” for example, may find that all educational biology sites are off limits. Moreover, say the critics, many of the firms that create filters do not make clear the ideological biases of their software programs. So that competitors will not steal the data that makes them unique, they are often reluctant to release the names of the sites they block or the filtering terms they use (Hunter, 1999).

The biggest drawback of monitors and safe haven sites - and a big drawback of filters as well - is that parents with only basic computer and Web skills may not feel comfortable using them. Almost as big a drawback is that adolescents can find ways to circumvent or disable many of these attempts to place limits on them. One nontechnological way they do that is simply by accessing the Web from places - friends' homes, libraries - where such barriers do not exist.

3.2. The Internet and information flows out of the home

If the Internet creates new control challenges for parents with respect to the commercialized information it brings into the home, these challenges pale next to the ones the Web is creating with respect to commercially useful information about the family that commercial interests take out of the home. Until rather recently, the information that marketers could retrieve from children and teenagers at home was limited by the need to go through a parent or school to speak to the youngsters or track their habits. The Internet has changed all that, with implications that family researchers have hardly begun to consider.

At the center of this activity is consumer profiling for the purpose of direct and relationship marketing. Profiling involves gathering specific demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle intelligence about individuals and families from a variety of public and private databases (Business Wire, 1998). Digital technologies enter the home with features that revolutionize the data marketers can get from people. Quite widespread are Web sites that offer free information, paraphernalia, phone calls, even cash if the user will enter personal information into a registration window and then visit the Web site.

Even when it does not appear that Web sites are collecting a lot of information about their visitors, it is likely that they are quite busy doing that. A close reading of Web “privacy policies” will reveal that virtually all the activities that individuals perform on Web sites can be tracked and catalogued.

To make Web sites particularly attractive to advertisers and visitors, companies are using increasingly sophisticated “cookies” and intelligent agents that determine the interests and habits of the visitors. The sites aim to offer them personalized ad and editorial environments based on an analysis of previous purchases, clickstream interests, and the personal characteristics noted during site registration.

Marketers hope that sophisticated data gathering and database management will converge in digital media to allow them to actually speak to segments, even individuals, in ways that reflect what they know about them (Turow, 1997). The growing ability to solicit information electronically from people without their full knowledge about its use has, however, drawn enormous concern from parents (Turow & Nir, 2000), as well as a gamut of advocacy groups. Advocates see the issue as one of information privacy, “the claim of individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others” (see Westin, 1967, p. xx). Of particular concern have been attempts by children's Web sites to elicit information about parents' incomes and lifestyles. Responding in part, the US Congress in 1998 passed the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which directed the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to regulate data collection by commercial Web sites that target kids under age 13. The FTC decreed that Web sites wanting information from children under 13 years old must get consent from parents. The required nature of the consent varies depending on the site's intended use of the information (Clausing, 1999).

3.3. The family challenge of two-way commercialism

Although marketers generally support COPPA, they insist that Web users 13 years and older are savvy enough to be able to handle information about themselves. Increasingly, Web executives say, society must move away from the notion that consumers hold that the absolute secrecy of certain types of information about themselves is their fundamental human right. Rather, they argue consumers will give up all sorts of sensitive information to companies if they trust the firms to use it properly and get commensurate benefits in return. They argue further that, with the rise of digital interactive media, information is and ought to be an important coin of exchange for the individual in the twenty-first century. As evidence, marketers point to the large numbers of Web users who freely give information about themselves to get information and material goods.

Advocates and academics have weighed in with a variety of opinions about the possible social impact of this “exchange” approach to information privacy. Despite the uproar over children's naive release of information to Web sites, few writers have explored the general implications of an individual's barter of information for the family unit. Most see information disclosure on the Web as an issue of individual rather than group information inflow and outflow. Coming at the topic from the standpoint of family information boundaries points to the importance of the latter view. Take the example of a 14-year-old who reveals his parents' favorite Web sites to a Web site for a “free” gift, not realizing that his parents consider such data sensitive. It turns out that his mother has a health problem that is reflected in the list of sites and that might, if revealed publicly, lead to employment discrimination or have implications for health insurance.

Writings on family information privacy suggest that concerns about this and other types of information leakage across their private/public boundaries may have profound impact on the family group, as well as on its individual members' psychological well being. Summarizing a stream of work on the topic, Berardo (1998) posits that society requires some monitoring of individuals and groups in order to enforce social norms. Domestic violence by men against women and children is an example of the dark side of information that families sometimes keep within their boundaries and should not. Yet, argues Berardo, there must be a balance between surveillance and privacy for effective functioning of a social structure. “Full surveillance of activities in a group would become psychologically overwhelming and, as a consequence, dysfunctional for the maintenance and stability of the group as a whole” (p. 8). “Information privacy,” he adds, “allows . . . sufficient autonomy from disruptive extra-familial scrutiny to foster a feeling of group cohesiveness, thereby enhancing solidarity” (p. 10).

The possibility that a loss of control over information about the family that goes out of the home - or even the fear - can weaken family bonds places a new light on Web privacy. Concern about the integrity of family information boundaries may be heightened when one considers that digital interactive technology provides, for the first time, a media environment where information surveillance and targeting marketing can work together in real time. Web information and, eventually, television programming, can be personalized to a family member based on volunteered, collected, and purchased data. In turn, creators of that programming collect information about the individual and his or her clickstream while the viewing is taking place. Parents may be concerned both about what information leaves the home as a result of the youngster's clickstream, and about the kinds of materials that he or she is bringing into his computer (or Web-TV) as a result of this personalization.

What we have, then, is an unprecedented, continual example of what Shapiro (1997) terms the "leakage of particular facets of one's life across the home boundaries and of the intrusion of undesired aspects of the world back across those boundaries" (p. x). If what Berardo, Elkind, the Carnegie Council and others say is correct, what may be happening over time is a weakening of the family in a spiraling manner. In a general social environment of embattled families, tensions over information leakage may help erode family cohesiveness. That, in turn, may make it easier for target marketing messages to reinforce separatism within the family - which, in turn, may allow for more information leakage and greater family tensions. And so on, in an increasing spiral of family tension and fractionalization created by information leakage.

4. Internet research and family boundaries

Evidence to support or refute this scenario about the family in the new media environment is almost totally absent. A recent national random telephone survey of 1001 parents of children aged 8-17 and 304 children aged 10-17 (Turow & Nir, 2000) attempted to break ground in this area. About half of the youngsters were linked to the parents, and half were not. The authors concluded that in many families the Web is becoming an arena for discord around the release of sensitive information. Their survey found that 45% of US 10-17-year olds are much more likely than parents to say it is OK to give sensitive personal and family information to commercial Web sites in exchange for a free gift. Examples of such information include their allowance, the names of their parents' favorite stores, and what their parents do on weekends.

The study also noted that 41% of US parents and 36% of youngsters recall tensions at home over kids' release of information to the Web. Curiously, 69% of the parents say they have had discussions with their children about what kinds of information to give up to Web sites, and 66% of the kids say they have had these discussions with their parents. However, when interviewers specifically focused on the 150 pairs of parents and kids in the same family, they found that most did not agree on whether these sorts of discussions had ever taken place. The authors infer that parent-child conversations about Web privacy issues are fleeting at best, perhaps in the form of "don't give out your name" or "don't talk to strangers" that parents have traditionally urged upon their children. They suggest that it is wrong to think that such simple discussions between parents and kids about what information to give to the Web can easily resolve family tensions over information privacy.

Clearly, there is much more work to do in this area. Existing data that can be brought to bear on the issue is scattered across a variety of studies. The family-boundaries framework presented above can help point research in useful directions. It suggests that questions and hypotheses will usefully center around four general areas: the Internet and family communication; filters, monitors, and the family; information disclosure practices and the family; and the Internet in the general media environment. The following pages will briefly sketch a few key issues in each domain and suggest how they intersect.

4.1. The Internet and family communication

The proposition that private/public boundaries will likely be constructed differently in different families can serve as a good departure point. A basic hypothesis is that families vary in the extent to which and the way in which they care about what information comes in and what goes out of the house via the Web. This seemingly straightforward statement, however, opens a variety of issues.

A key set of questions centers on what it really means to say that “families vary” in “setting boundaries” regarding the Web information that comes in and goes out of their homes. Who in the family sets the boundaries? Do family members challenge them and force changes? If so, who, when, why, and how?

A major problem is whether it is, in fact, realistic to assume the existence of one private/public information boundary that individuals within a family perceive in the same way. The very idea of social construction makes it likely that what writers call a boundary is really a melange of contested statements, actions, and accommodations regarding the Web by family members that not only change over time but that might be described quite differently by various individuals involved. Researchers should describe the dynamic nature of such private/public boundary making within families. Studies may well find that families differ substantially in the nature of their contested, continually changing statements, actions, and accommodations regarding what can come in and go out of the home via the Web.

This basic understanding of these family dynamics will allow for the exploration of the central issue suggested by the family-boundaries perspective: the extent to which the Web’s commercialization is reinforcing differentiation between family members, tensions about incoming materials some family members find objectionable, and worries about family information privacy. Another key is whether and how Web benefits such as e-mail, chat rooms, interesting information, and homework help yield a counterbalancing force that supports family unity. Operationalizing words such as differentiation, tensions, objectionable, worries, and counterbalance will be a challenge and incite debate. Moreover, the work must take place with a textured understanding of the social and historical contexts in which families live.

4.2. Filters, monitors, and the family

One way in which a growing number of parents have been trying to control family boundaries when it comes to their children bringing objectionable Web materials into the home is by using filters and monitors. Despite vigorous debate about the use of filters in libraries, no research has actually explored the use and implications of Internet filters in homes. Basic questions need to be addressed, with an eye on whether filters really do mitigate the anxieties of the parents involved about the permeability of their families’ boundaries. Of special interest is whether parents decide to use filters more out of fears of the Web that they pick up from the press than from bad experiences within their families or the families of people they know. One project (Turow, 1999a) found that the opinions of a national sample of parents about the Web mapped quite closely onto the way a national sample of newspapers discussed the family and the Internet. A long tradition of media agenda-setting research, as well as a newer stream of framing studies, can help to shape work on this important question.

Almost lost in the discussion of filtering is a straightforward alternative that retains adult oversight but does not lock out the Web. It is the use of monitoring software to observe children’s behavior, either with or without their knowing it. Someone opposing monitoring might argue that it invades a youngster’s privacy. Someone supporting it might reply that use of monitor software is akin to a parent looking over the youngster’s shoulder, especially if the child knows that the monitor exists. Careful study of the use of such monitors may stir or calm this controversy.

4.3. Information disclosure practices and the family

While research surrounding Web filters and monitors speaks to family boundary negotiations in the face of nervousness about material coming into the home, the topic of information disclosure practices relates to data that marketers and others try to take out of the house. Here lie great opportunities for

exploration of the relationship between family information boundaries and changing social environments. It seems logical to assume that families hold norms about information disclosure. Adults may have their own implicit and explicit rules about what to say about family affairs to “outsiders.” Parents may tell children not to tell strangers their names, not to talk to telephone marketers, not to talk about certain sensitive family practices. They may elaborate definitions of “outsiders” for the kids. Children, in turn, may develop their own rules about disclosing certain kinds of information about themselves, their siblings, or their parents to friends, relatives, teachers, and other outsiders.

Are parents articulating norms about the release of information to the Web - and, if so, how? How sophisticated are different types of families and specific family members when making sure that only the information they want released will go out? The possibility that in some families the greatest knowledge about the Web may lie with the children rather than the parents may make it difficult for some parents to articulate and police certain Web disclosure norms. Wartella (personal communication, 1999) notes that this sort of knowledge asymmetry recalls the predicament of US immigrants, who often find themselves feeling much less savvy than their quickly Americanizing and English-speaking children. The intriguing comparison deserves elaboration with an eye to its implications for younger and older family members' negotiation of, and adherence to, family information boundaries.

4.4. The Internet in the general media environment

Adults and youngsters constantly monitor their environment. Implicitly or explicitly, they make decisions about what can go in and go out, fight about those decisions, circumvent them, forget them, ignore them. Researchers' awareness of this process can guide many questions about the Internet and the family.

However, researchers also need to recognize that the Internet does not exist on its own. It is part of a much larger web of media and non-media activities that relate to the home and the family. This development particularly affects the direction of commercial media. The marketing mandate of the twenty-first century is to follow target audiences wherever they go, on any medium that they use (see Turow, 1999b, chapters 18-19). To truly understand the implications of the Web for the family, researchers must stay on top of media and marketing trends that might affect the family and its members.

How do advertisers understand the family? How and why do advertisers try to target family members in certain ways? How do media firms respond to advertiser interests in their attempts to reach the targets? What do the changing media tactics mean for the commercial blandishments that different family members receive? What do changing marketing tactics mean for information that marketers want to bring in and take out of the home? In what way and to what extent do these tactics affect family boundary making with respect to the Web and other media?

Addressing these questions will place the Internet, commercialism, and the family into a broad societal context. Doing that will require a close understanding of the media and marketing industries. Studies that explore the historical and cultural roles of media and commercialism in American family life are critical for a proper understanding of the Web's impact. Similarly, assessments of contemporary industry strategies are key to understanding contemporary business strategies toward family information boundaries, the social discourse about it, and the possible large-scale implications of that.

5. A look ahead

There is certainly much to study. Moreover, the Web is changing quickly. Every month, the Web gets bigger, more commercialized, and more quickly accessible to many Americans. The notion of a discrete “Web” in the home is also likely to blur as interactive digital television, radio, and print materials become common via broadband technologies. Along with these new developments will come a wide array of target-marketing activities aimed at youngsters, as well as parents and entire families.

To get a good grasp on the nature and implications of these developments, research methods to explore them should vary. Some studies will involve interviewing family members in depth; others may

take place through paper-and-pencil surveys; and still others through ethnographic or experimental approaches. Because the US is only at early stages in adopting the Web, many of the family dynamics may still be too new or too subtle to observe. Longitudinal research on families is therefore warranted, as is research comparing otherwise similar families who have had the Web at home for different lengths of time.

The Web we have now, though, represents the beginning of this new digital realm. It, or versions of it, is here to stay. So is the family, the cradle of child development. How the two relate to one another is a subject that is likely to occupy researchers in the coming century. Looking at these developments through the prism of family information boundaries would seem to be a good way to start.

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